

[The Patent Medicine Vendor]

[LIFE HISTORY?]

February 28, 1939

Mrs. Grace Crowder (white)

250 Baxter St.

Athens, Georgia

Tailor assistant

Grace McCune THE PATENT MEDICINE VENDOR

"I was just about eight when I met my first husband. That sounds funny, but it is the truth, but I did not dream of such a thing as ever marrying that old man, but that just goes to prove that we never know what is in store for us."

A customer came in the shop where Mrs. Cherry works, and as she waited on him, I looked around the shop which was a large room, with several long tables that were used for cutting and marking clothes. A large clothes rack at one end of the room, held finished garments. A sewing table, with a machine on each side, one electric but the other was just a plain sewing machine with the foot peddle.

The large heater at one side of the room, and it was very warm, coming out of the cold wind and rain. Four large windows furnished a good light to work by. The room was very comfortable and as the customers chatted for a few minutes about the weather and to inquire about the woman who owned the shop and was at home sick.

Library of Congress

As the customers left, Mrs. Cherry came back to the fire. "It is cold," she said, "and all this rain is awful but there is nothing we can do about it, except grin and get wet.

2

"But just where did I get In the story. I believe I was telling how I met my first husband. We had just moved to that house, which was near a university and he was one of the stewards in the school. The school grounds joined our lot on the back, and they raised their vegetables. The corn and potato patch joined our lot. They had cows also and there was a branch running through their pasture. This branch was a good place to wade, and all the kids around played in it.

"I was one of the smallest kids in the crowd and he would pick me lots of times and carry me to keep the weeds and briars from hurting my feet. I thought he was great, especially as he was always giving me candy, chewing gum or apples. Why, I just knew he was the best man I knew, and he would tell us about his little girl. She was a year or so older than I and lived with an aunt, as her mother was dead.

"He was good to all the children but I was his favorite. They thought it was because I was the smallest one of them, and too I played in the pasture lots of times when they were in school for I couldn't go to school because my eyes were bad. I got sick, I just caught the measles but I was pretty sick. He never missed a day coming to see me and would always bring me something. He told mama one day that he wished she would give me to him. Mama just laughed and said, 'Why I couldn't give my baby away; we couldn't do without her.

"He laughed also and said, 'Well, when she gets older I am coming back after her. Of course they all laughed and told him alright, for they didn't think as old as he was he would 3 ever think about me, except as a kid. They teased me all the time about him, and kid like it pleased me, but he petted me as long as he stayed there which was for several years after I first saw him.

Library of Congress

"When he did leave the university; he came by the house to tell us good-bye and that he was going to Atlanta, but said 'I am coming back after you.' I guess I was about eleven then. Mama just laughed and said, 'alright.' She thought he was just talking, and I didn't hear from him for about a year. Then one day I got a letter from him saying that he had not forgotten and was still coming back for me, and kid like I felt flattered. I just didn't have any sense.

"He kept writing to me and when I was fifteen he came back and said he had come for me. I didn't realize what I was doing, and thought I was just head over heels in love. Nothing would do except that I must marry him. We had a home wedding. The house was really lovely. It was decorated with large palms, ferns and flowers of all kinds.

"I was married in the afternoon about four o'clock. My wedding dress was gray chiffon and I had grey accessories. My flowers were white roses. I was scared almost to death and turned his hand loose several times during the ceremony. The preacher had to keep reminding me that I would have to hold hands. The preacher was an old friend of our family. In fact we were then living in his house and he had married my sister just about a year before in this same house, and in the room next to the one he married me. It seemed to me as if he never would get through praying.

4

"We did not have a reception for we left immediately after the ceremony for the city where he lived, but there was a large crowd of people and we received many nice presents. The man he worked for gave us a check for one hundred dollars, and when we reached the city where he lived his boss had our house all furnished and ready for us.

"My husband as I have told you was years older than I, and he was working for an old Indian medicine company. The main office or plant where the medicine was made was in this city. He would stay in the plant until a large supply was made and ready to ship and then he went on the road to advertise it. This kept him on the road most of the time.

Library of Congress

"The office and plant was in a large lovely old home, that the company had bought, and it was fixed up to be convenient in every way, both for the work and the ones that worked there. Why they even had a large swimming pool for the use of the people that worked for them. They were mighty good people to work for.

"I went to work for my husband and started in the laboratory to learn the business from the beginning and I started in at six dollars a week. My husband was getting fifty dollars a week. The first thing I did was label bottles. At first this was done by hand, but business grew so that we had to have a machine to label as well as fill the bottles and it wasn't long until I could label more bottles than anyone else. I was paid more. I think it was raised to ten dollars a week.

5

"It wasn't long then until I was taken in the laboratory where the medicine was made, and the doctor in charge of this department taught me how to make the medicine up. I really enjoyed this work for it was really interesting and you know it was really a good medicine. We used it ourselves so you know it was good. I could soon make it as good as the doctor. When we had a good supply made we were ready for the road work. I was looking forward to this for I didn't realize what it meant and thought it would be fun.

"But I soon learned better than that. As I said the medicine was really good and was in demand. It was sold all over the United States. Why one man that run a chain of drug stores bought about one hundred carloads at one time. We had salesmen on the road to make the sales and then we did the advertising also giving out circulars and coupons and for this my husband carried several crew managers with him. But the others were hired to work under them in the towns where we were working.

"As it was an Indian medicine all the people that advertised were made up as Indians. The crew managers went on a day ahead. Yes they had enough of them so they could do this. They carried a supply of the Indian suits for the men giving out the circulars wore

Library of Congress

the Indian suits also. The medicine sold for a dollar a bottle and the coupons that we gave away was good for thirty five cents on a bottle of medicine.

“My job was to advertise at the drugstores while the crew managers and their men canvassed the town. My husband saw that 6 it was all done and the first day or so it was alright. I thought it was fun. I was dressed in a soft leather suit, all trimmed up in beads and fringe, leather moccassim shoes with beads, my face and hands were stained and I wore a wig with corse balck hair and feathers in my hair, and hanging down over my shoulders. You know how it all looked for I know you have seen pictures of them. I stood at the door of the drugstore and gave away coupons.

“Yes, I made good money for when I went on the road I was paid twenty-five dollars a week and all expenses. My husband made fifty dollars. The crew managers were paid fifteen dollars. Of course all our expenses were paid by the company. The men or boys that he hired in the towns were paid twelve dollars a week or two dollars a day for it was a large town if they stayed there for a week. My husband and I only stayed one day at a town and then we went on to the next town.

“We didn't travel in cars but went on the trains. I soon grew tired of it for standing all day and then getting the make up off and rushing to catch trains sometimes didn't have time to eat and very little sleep and very often we could not get a good place to stay for this was during war times and you know how things were then.

“Sometimes we almost froze to death in the winter time. Maybe we would get in about day light and have to get ready for the day's work, probably have to get on the job before we had time to eat and we had to be on the job for that was in the 7 the company was to do all the advertising. I was the only woman on the road, but my husband saw that I did my part.

“We didn't go to the small towns where there were no trains. The salesmen and crew managers took care of them. But hard as the work was I would want to laugh sometimes especially at the kids. They would get off and look at me just knew they were looking at an

Library of Congress

honest to goodness Indian woman, but then some of the grown ups were as bad as the children and have asked me all kinds of questions. I was not supposed to be able to talk any English and I even had one to pinch me one day to see if I was real. She laughed and said, "That is one time I could hardly keep still.

"One time we went into a town to work. It had been raining for days. I was just tired and worn out. The rivers were all high and especially so at this town. The trains were the only means of getting in and that was dangerous. But we had to go. It was late at night when we got in. We were both tired, sleepy and hungry. We did not take all of our baggage out of the depot that night, thinking we would just wait until morning to get them.

"But that is where we made a mistake for the river kept getting higher during the night and by morning was in the streets and the depot also. All of our clothes were ruined. It was three days before we could get away from that town. I never was so tired of looking at water, and it was cold and we had colds and I was glad to get back in our hometown for we had to go back and get up another supply of medicine & ready. It was just that way all the time.

"We would stay on the road until the medicine gave out and then we had to come back in and help get another supply made up. I did hate for time to come to go back on the road. I begged my husband to let me stay in the office, but would not hear to that. I don't know why it was but he was extremely jealous of me and I had to go with him all the time. so there was nothing for me to do except keep going.

"We had to keep up with all those Indian suits that were used by the crew managers for their boys that distributed circulars. This was not as easy as one might think for they sent in from many different towns at time to laundered and we had to send out fresh ones. There was always something to keep you on the move. I did not get very much in the evenings for any past time or pleasure for when we were on the road I was really too tired

Library of Congress

to think of it and too I had no time for it was catch a train by the time I was off so I could be at another town by morning.

“And when we were at home we worked also and in the evening my husband was old and enjoyed sitting around reading his paper and discussing the days work, and he was not willing for me to go without him. I was young and grew tired of all this. I realized then what I had done and every day it grew worse but I didn't know what to do and I just stood it for three years and we separated.

“He changed jobs then and went to work as a landscape gardener on a large private estate. He kept begging until I finally went back to him but we just couldn't make a go then 9 and I finally decided the best thing for both of us, and after being married three years, we separated for good. He went to another town and I went to work there in a paper mill.

“But before I get off of that part of my story I am going to tell you about one of the doors in the office of the medicine plant. I don't expect you to believe it for I didn't until I saw it happen myself. But when I first went there to work one of the girls told me about this door. She said that everytime it was locked it would come open.

“I just laughed and passed it up for I was a new hand and thought they weretrying to have a little fun with me. I didn't think of it again for sometime. Then one day I just happened to think about it and I told my husband about the girls trying to play a joke on me. He said, ‘Haven't you ever seen that door? Come on and I will show it to you.

“He carried me in the office and told me to lock the door. I still thought they were trying to play a joke on me. But I locked the door and took the key out. I then tried it to see if it was really locked. It was and I laughed and started to a chair to set down saying I guess it wont come open this time. My husband said, ‘Well, what do you say now? I looked and the door was coming open just as if some one was opening it, but there was no one there. I tried it two or three times and everytime I locked it, it came open. But if you just pushed it to then

Library of Congress

it would stay closed. It was that way all the time I was there. But that was a real old home and I am sure it must have an interesting history.

10

But not so long after we left the medicine company, the owner of it died and he had really made money out of it, and took care of it, but after his death, his brother took charge of it and just went through with everything and it was soon broke and sold to pay up the debts.

“After I had been separated sometime from my husband and he had left town, I got my divorce. I was still working and so sure that I was through with men for the rest of my life. The girl that I roomed with would laugh at me and say just wait young women, you are just getting old enough to have a good time, and to start to thinking of getting married.

“I did not think she was right. In fact, I just knew I would never marry again. I did have a good time, just went some where most every evening, shows, dances, or sometimes we would have a card party for my room mate although a little older than I was enjoyed a good time also. We always went out together. It was not so many months before I met my second husband.

“He was so nice and kind all together different from the first one for we were nearer the same age. I met him in May and we were married in September. He worked in a large railroad machine shop and made sixty dollars a week. I wanted to work on, but he wouldn't listen to me, he said that he didn't want me to work and we were so happy and got along so good.

“His father run a blacksmith shop in another town. He got kicked by a mule and was hurt pretty bad. He sent for my husband to come and look after his shop until he was able to work again. We went. He gave up his job in the railroad shop. We stayed at his fathers until he was able to look after his

page-II set up the wheels on the shovels, which were pulled by two mules.

shop again. He didn't want my husband to leave, but we wanted to get out to ourselves again. He went to work for a highway construction company that was grading the highway going into Alabama.

He worked for them as a blacksmith and he also set up the wheels on the steam shovels set up the wheels on the shovels, which were pulled by two mules. I don't know whether you know anything about these things or not, but they have to be adjusted just right to pick up the same amount of dirt all the way around or it will tilt it all over. He was the only one that could do this kind of work and they paid him a good salary.

"We were on the road all the time, following the crew of workers, but still it was not like it was before for I didn't have anything to do. But it was lonesome. For most of the time, there was only two or three white people with about a hundred Negroes. We never had any trouble with them. They all liked my husband and were very nice to me and we stayed with them until just a short time before our first child was born.

"My husband settled down in a small town in Alabama in a small town in Alabama and opened a shop of his own. We did fine there. He did a lot of work for the construction company as long as they were near enough to him. His boss didn't want him to quit, said he could send me to a hospital and work on. He wouldn't do it. He said that he wasn't going to leave me. After our baby came we stayed on there until his father got hurt again and wrote for him to come and run his shop for him. He was making good with his own shop and we did hate to give it up. His father was old and begged so hard for him to come, we decided that we would go, but only until his father was able to look after his work again for we did not like to stay there. His father was really in a bad condition from being kicked again by a mule. The doctors didn't think he would ever be able to work again, but he finally got up and after a few months he was strong enough to look after his shop again. And we left. My husband went back to his old job in the railroad shop and we were very

Library of Congress

glad to get back. Of course, we were foolish over the baby but he just thought that he had the only child in the world just worshipped that little girl.

"We stayed there for a long time. His old boss kept writing for him to come back to work for him in the construction company. He did not want to go, he said it was no place to rear a baby. Then we were expecting another baby. But all at once they had to put off some of the men in the shop and as my husband was one of the last ones to go to work, he felt sure he would be one of them.

"He was right. It was not many weeks until he was laid off. They let him work as long as they could for he was a good worker and knew how to do it, and they told him that they were going to put him back just as soon as they possibly could. But he said he couldn't depend on that with a family to take care of and we decided that maybe he had better go back with the construction company.

13

He was worried to death about me and how we could manage and him away from home, but I told him I could come home and stay for a while and perhaps by that time I was well again. We could arrange things so that we could go with him at least part of the time, if not all the time, but he just couldn't hardly stand the idea of being away from me and the baby.

"We went with him for a few weeks, rented a room nearby, where the gang was working on a large dam, and he could come home at night and then I came home. He came part of the way with me and said he was just a good mind not to leave us and go back. He just seemed to feel that he wouldn't see us any more. I tried to reason with him that we would soon be back, but I don't know why he felt as he did. But he was right and that was the last time I ever saw him.

"I wired him as soon as I got here and wrote him the next day. I had one letter from him telling me to be sure and let him hear from me every day for he was uneasy about me. But that is the last I ever heard from him. I knew something was wrong, for it was not like

Library of Congress

him to treat me that way and we had never had any fusses or disagreements. They said at home, 'Oh, well, he just wanted to get rid of you.'

"I wrote to his boss, but when the letter came I was so sick they would not tell anything about it. But when my baby was about a month old they gave me the letter and he wrote me that my husband was killed in an accident a few days after I left. He said that he knew my condition and didn't know where I was, but thought I was with my husband's people and that he wired them.

14

"They didn't let me know anything about it. They didn't like it because we didn't stay on with them. I wrote to them and asked them to tell me more about it and they never answered my letter but one of the men that worked with him told me later that he was in one of the trucks and was crossing the railroad when a train came around a curve and hit the truck, and tore it to pieces and that my husband's body was crushed.

"I knew when I didn't hear from him that something was wrong, for it was not like him to treat anyone that way, and especially his family. I have thought many times since then that he must have had some warning that something was going to happen the reason that he hated for us to leave so bad.

"I have had a tough time since then trying to raise my two little girls. It has been a hard fight. I am trying to do the best I can and get them through school and for the last few years I have had one of my sisters little girls to take care of since her mother died and she will tell you today that there is not one bit of difference shown between her and my children for I do not make any difference. What one has they all have.

Library of Congress

“But I do the best I can. My eyes are so bad that I can't work like I need to, but I feel like that if I try and do the best I can that there will be a way provided for me to take care of them for I still have my faith.”